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ABSTRACT

Networks have emerged as a major topic of interest in the behavioral sciences, and network concepts have recently been extended by community psychologists to higher education. To examine the effectiveness of peer networks within an introductory psychology class, networks of four students each met weekly in place of a lecture to review material and prepare for exams. Participants were encouraged to seek mutual help in addition to classroom meetings. A comparable, traditional class with the same instructor, syllabus and exams served as a control group. The networking class improved in three areas: (1) academic, i.e., quizzes, midterm and final exams; (2) networking, i.e., number of students known by name; and (3) social climate assessment, i.e., students' perceived classroom social climate. Although the networking generally received favorable reviews, end of the semester discussions indicated that some students experienced anxiety in the group interactions, and viewed networking as a failure of teacher responsibility. The findings indicate that future plans should include development of a more structured network experience to reduce stress, and an increase in out-of-classroom meetings. (Author/MCF)

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Peer Support Networks in a Large Introductory Psychology Class *

by

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Peer Support Networks in a Large Introductory Psychology Class

Networks have emerged as a major topic of interest across various disciplines in the behavioral sciences. In the health and human services, in particular, the role of networks in the provision of social support and facilitation of coping skills has been extensively considered (see Sarason et al., 1977; Sarason & Lorentz, 1979). Recently, network concepts have been extended by community psychologists to higher education. For example, Gottlieb and Todd (1979) reported on "support development groups" among college freshmen designed to enhance their abilities to utilize their social networks. Similarly, Hirsch (1979) has examined the role of natural support networks in reducing stress during final exam periods.

Numerous innovative programs in psychology instruction have employed peers (i.e., other college students) in the capacities of tutor, proctor, etc. (see bibliography by Daniel, 1979). In the "reciprocal learning" project (Brown & Engram, 1979), for example, tutors trained non-traditional Introductory Psychology students in study skills as well as psychological concepts. The "reciprocal" aspect of the project was emphasized since tutors also benefited from the experience of conducting small-group study sessions.

The purpose of the present study was to explore a new vehicle for utilizing peers in the instructional process. Specifically, we examined the effectiveness of peer networks formed within an Introductory Psychology class, as compared to a traditional lecture/discussion format.

Method

Subjects

Students enrolled in 2 Introductory Psychology classes served as participants in the study. The experimental class (N=50) received the "network" intervention, while a comparison class (N=29) continued with a traditional lecture/discussion format. Students were primarily freshmen, representing a wide range of majors (mostly non-psychology). A significant number of students were under-prepared for college work. Experimental and control classes were comparable on such variables as age, sex, academic ability, and major distribution. Further, no significant difference emerged on the first quiz, administered prior to selecting the experimental class.

Measures

Three classes of measures were employed in the study: (1) academic; (2) networking; and (3) social climate.

Academic measures. The combined total of 6 bi-weekly quizzes, a midterm exam, and a final exam constituted the three academic measures. All quizzes and exams were identical for both classes. All exams were of the multiple choice format.

Networking measure. At the conclusion of the semester students in both classes listed, by name, all students in the class that they knew.

Social climate assessment. Students' perceived classroom social climate was measured by the Classroom Environment Scale (CES; Moos & Trickett, 1974). The scale taps three broad environmental dimensions, each containing several sub-scales.

The nine (9) sub-scales, grouped along the broader dimensions are: Involvement, Affiliation, and Teacher Support (Relationship Dimensions); Task Orientation and Competition (Personal Development Dimensions); Order/Organization, Rule Clarity, Teacher Control, and Innovation (System Maintenance and Change Dimensions).

Network Intervention Program

Students in the experimental class were divided into networks of 4 persons each. The networks met as a group each Friday in lieu of the regular lecture. Students worked together studying course material and preparing for exams. The professor and an undergraduate teaching assistant circulated among the networks to facilitate cooperative work and help maintain their task orientation. Students were encouraged to exchange names and telephone numbers, to exchange notes in case of absence, and to contact one other outside of the weekly network meetings for mutual-help. Most networks remained intact for the duration of the semester.

Procedure

During the third week of the semester, after the first quiz, one of two classes taught by the same instructor was assigned to the network intervention, with the other remaining as the control. Networks were generated by selecting students who received a high quiz score, a low quiz score, and 2 medium scores to form a 4-person group. Both classes met 3 times weekly for 50-minute periods. The identical syllabus was followed, with both classes receiving the same instruction (largely lecture and discussion), except for the network component. The same exams were administered to both groups on the same days. During the last week both classes completed the networking measure and the Classroom Environment Scale.

Results

Academic Measures

Significant between-group differences, favoring the experimental class, emerged on all 3 academic measures: $\underline{t}$ (77) = 2.42, $p < .05$ (for summation of bi-weekly quizzes); $\underline{t}$ (77) = 3.01, $p < .01$ (for midterm exam); and, $\underline{t}$ (77) = 2.06, $p < .05$ (for final exam).

Networking Measure

Mean difference on the number of students known by name (4.85 in the experimental class versus 3.2 in the control) was significant at the .01 level, $\underline{t}$ (77) = 2.76 . To gain a finer sense of variations in networking between the two classes a Chi Square analysis was conducted. In the experimental class: 11 students knew 7 or more names, compared to none in the control; 10 knew 3 names, compared to 0 in the control; 21 knew 4-6 names, compared to 15 in the control; and 2 knew less than 3 names, compared to 13 in the control. The overall difference is significant at the .01 level, X^2 (3) = 25.42 .

Social Climate Assessment

Two sub-scales of the Classroom Environment Scale reached statistical significance, favoring the network class. They are: Affiliation, $\underline{t}$ (77) = 10.66, $p < .01$; and, Innovation, $\underline{t}$ (77) = 3.78, $p < .01$. No differences emerged on the other sub-scales.

Discussion

The findings of the present study suggest that intra-class student networks improve academic performance, enhance social climate, and increase the number of students known. The networks provided opportunities for students to participate more actively

in their own learning, while helping others learn. At the same time, it appears that peer networks contributed to the creation of a greater sense of personal and social affiliation by humanizing the classroom environment, and increasing options for learning and socializing within and outside the classroom. The networking measure revealed that the opportunity to meet 3 other people caused even greater social benefit in the experimental group, as students sought out classmates beyond those in their network. Eleven students knew 7 or more names, while in the control group no student knew so many names.

Although the network intervention was generally perceived as innovative, there were some negative features associated with the program. Open-ended questions at the end of the semester indicated that some students felt anxious about participating in group interaction. The requirement of a more "activated" student role, both in the academic and social domains, was perceived by some students as a burden. Furthermore, some students viewed the networks as a shirking of teacher responsibility, espousing the belief that only the legitimate professional authority can deliver "officially authentic" education.

To strengthen the intervention, we plan to develop behaviorally-oriented exercises for the network meetings. A format whereby different members of a group assume responsibility for previously designated components of text/lecture material may reduce some of the stress associated with the current, less-structured experience. Also, we plan to place more emphasis on guiding increased network meetings outside of class.

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